

TALES FROM WINESBURG, INDIANA

Michael Martone

RUEL COAL & ICE

There's not much call for coal no more. Or ice, now that I think about it. Once, the two fit together like, well, coal and ice. The business was just about hauling solid blocks of stuff always on the edge of turning into something else. There's still the pond outside of town with the siding where the Pennsy set out a cut of cars. We iced the reefers there and then. And in the season we transshipped the coal the hoppers dumped in the bins. We still sell a scuttle or two. Someone has a potbelly in the tool shed. There's the one oven at the bakery. You know the alleys of Winesburg were paved in cinders, clinkers from the coal. I remember the smoke leaked up into the sky, raking the clouds all over town. We hauled the ashes as well. Now our revenue is realized through

renting the roof out to antenna arrays, microwaves to mine the sized electromagnetic soup. It's just another state of matter. Invisible? Sure. Welcome to my goddamn sublime apocalypse.

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SUNSET CONTRAIL VIEWING

It has something to do with the topography, the atmospherics hereabouts. The lake effect. The flatness. The temperamental barometric pressures that percolate from the numerous Belted Galloway herds of the neighborhood. The distorted magnetic fields. The transpiration of the corn crop. The thermal inversions generated by the vast murmurations of starlings. Somehow the contrails emitted by the day's jet traffic overhead all over America end up aloft above Winesburg. It's a kind of cloud sump, a vapor drain. It is what we do hereabouts most nights, view the train wrecks of the contrails, the collisions and the congestion. It brings us a kind of comfort. Comfort. Fossils of time. Ruins of the long gone.

THE BAT BOXES OF WINESBURG, INDIANA

I like bats. You can say I am the number one fan of the Indiana Bat. The Indiana Bat--a little guy, a quarter of an ounce, the weight of four dimes. But it has a fatal flaw. Not its size. Its size is fine. No. Its fatal flaw is how it hibernates each winter in these droves of 50,000 or more in the caves hollowed out around Winesburg, here in the northernmost reaches of the limestone karst of Indiana. But that is still okay. Their small size, their vast numbers. No, it's the white nose syndrome that's at them. And none of us knows what is up with that. So I build bat houses to help out. I encourage my neighbors to do the same. During summer they roost under the peeling bark of dead and dying trees. And the plywood boxes mimic that natural delamination. The bats hang out in habitats of small river and stream corridors of mature riparian woods. So I build the boxes within a few miles of the branches of the western fork of the Fork River as they disappear in sinkholes underground. In the summer, the lightning bugs spark off of the branches of the understory of the dogwood and redbud trees. The swallows and the swifts jink and swoop in the dusk. And the Indiana Bats sift out of the baffles of the bat houses like the litter of leaves, like saw dust from some unseen sanding.

CARSON CARLSON, LINOLEUM INSTALLER

I don't install linoleum. I install polyvinyl chloride in sheets or tiles. It's a common mistake. Completely different material, but it doesn't matter. "Linoleum" comes from the Latin for flax, *linum*, and the Latin for oil, *oleum*. It just sounds better beneath your feet than, say, polyvinyl chloride. Linoleum. The mumbling of a Latin mass. I used to correct people when they made the mistake. At times coming close to blows. It's a common mistake. I was a stickler once for the technically correct term. I have my pride. A professional, a propriety thing. But over time I let it go. I install a plastic after all. I am, let's say, pliable. Linoleum. Certain words wear a pattern. Spring to mind. Linoleum. Become, um, harmonic. A kind of hum.

THE COUNTY EXTENSION AGENT

It is just a grass, corn, a grass gone wild. And, it seems, every corner of this corner of Indiana (a corner flat as a flat iron flattened by the ironing glaciers making for the ideal landscape for the grass) is plaited by the plant. It looks so innocent. But we are warned, when we are knee high to the 4th of July, not to venture into the amazing maze of the mature field of maize. It doesn't matter though. Every summer, a toddler will toddle into some seam of a corn row, a corn row with the ripe ten-foot flying buttress-y stalks stitching together an opaque canopy overhead. It's a cinch the kid is lost. And we have to go in after, walking the mile long row, losing track of the lookers in the rows on either side. It's all scale, and you yourself shrink as you yourself search, shrink to the point where you yourself are lost at seeing, disoriented and adrift, listing, sinking. You yourself begin to see things.

ZANDOR SANDS, HOMEOWNER

Every time after I take a shower, I squeegee down the fiberglass walls of the stall. You don't want the beads of water to be left behind to evaporate. It leaves a film, a kind of ghost, of dissolved soap that can build up over time into a real scum. The squeegeeing takes care of that. It leaves behind a pristine dry surface as if you never took a shower in the first place. I have a whole routine worked out. I like to make sure the swipe of one pass laps over the edge of the previous sweep. In this way I get every last bead of water. Oh, and it is different on the glass of the shower doors. You squeegee off the steam and yet the glass is still diffused but not as diffused as it was before you squeegeed off the glass. My father taught me this. To squeegee. He wanted me to squeegee the tiles of the bath surround at home, and I did. He might have even given me the squeegee I use now to squeegee my own shower stall walls. A housewarming gift of sorts. I think he did, yes. I use the squeegee on everything now. Windows, of course. The house's siding after it rains as mildew can build up outside as well as inside. You know, it is something. Every time I squeegee, and that's almost every day, I think of my old man. It's one of the many things he worried about when he was alive, all those tears accumulating ahead of that elaborate elastic squeak.

Michael Martone was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana. His new books are *Brooding: Arias, Choruses, Lullabies, Follies, Dirges, and a Duet* and *The Moon over Wapakoneta: Fictions and Science Fictions from Indiana and Beyond*. He lives in Tuscaloosa and teaches at the university there.